

Hard Conversations, Committed Relationships

Writing team

Merle Burkholder (ON), John Coblenz (PA), Matt Landis (PA), Gary Miller (ID), and David Yoder (KS)

Introduction

We live in a world of many voices—passionate voices, conflicting voices, angry voices, subtle voices, loud voices. And platforms exist for nearly every voice to make its case. Consider the differing opinions people have about Bible versions, alternative medicine, or receiving stimulus checks. This article is not intended to address controversial issues such as these, but to have us think about how we speak to each other when we disagree.

In the world, verbal fights are common. All sorts of hot-button issues spill over into daily conversations and onto social media streams where the comments quickly turn rancorous and inflammatory.

Having more opportunities to circumvent face-to-face conversations seems to be giving people freedom to use nasty language with seeming impunity. Even more disheartening is that people who claim to follow Jesus are echoing the provocative rhetoric of talk show hosts, fringe groups, and angry politicians.

How shall we live in such a world? To whom shall we listen in such a world? And more to the point, how shall we speak to one another when there are differences of opinion in the local church?

Jesus prayed for unity

That last night before He was arrested, Jesus prayed passionately for His followers, “That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:20, 21). We don’t understand Jesus to assume that Christians would never disagree. In fact, His prayer may assume the likelihood of disagreement. But He surely intends that when we disagree, we discuss our differences and come to agreement in ways that do not lead to hurt feelings, broken relationships, and division within the body of Christ.

The focus of this article is to address the ways Christians engage with one another when they disagree, and to address them so that we align with Jesus’ prayer rather than disregard Him.

Jesus came to bring peace

At His birth, the angels announced, “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14). Jesus came above all to bring us back to the Father. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:11-13).

We who had been God’s enemies have been brought into His family as sons and daughters. Jesus made this possible through His death and resurrection.

This is wonder enough to make our jaws drop and our knees bend, but it is not all. In the next verses, Paul carries it forward. “For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:14-18).

Jesus not only reconciled us to God but brought Jews and Gentiles into the same family to live in peace with each other. In our setting today, it is difficult to understand the wonder of this reality—that Jews would embrace Gentiles as fellow heirs in the Messiah, that Gentiles would love Jews as their own brothers and sisters. Who could have imagined it? But Jesus made it happen.

And that same oneness and peace is to be our experience today in God’s family. This peace, however, must be nurtured and maintained. Paul wrote later in the same letter, “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. . . .” (Ephesians 4:1-4).

Peace among God’s children is not something we must manufacture. We are called to “keep” it, not make it. There is an essential peace in the “DNA” of believers. It is there because Jesus Himself is our peace. The psalmist says that those who love God’s Law have “great peace. . . . And nothing causes them to stumble” (Psalm 119:165).

But notice that Paul names attitudes and behaviors that are necessary for preserving this peace in our relationships with each other—lowliness, gentleness, longsuffering, bearing with one another. This is not the only New Testament passage that addresses our interactions as believers. The letters of Paul, Peter, John, and James frequently address how we are to speak and act, and what attitudes enable healthy conversations in Christian community.

Rules of engagement

1. Humility is a must.

To discuss issues of difference, we must “not be wise in [our] own eyes” (Pr. 3:7), but rather, we must value the perspectives of fellow members. This calls for humility. Pride leads to fighting, argument, and bitter rivalry. If we are good at beating up others with our words, our “wisdom” is earthly, not from God (see James 3:13-16).

2. Careful listening is helpful.

James writes, “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (1:19). When we hear a perspective different from ours in God’s family, we should seek first to understand before we try to add to it or counter it. James says later, “The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17).

3. Respectful engagement must be the norm.

We see this over and over in the New Testament instructions about our speech. When we speak to each other, we are to be kind, thoughtful, considerate, respectful, and courteous. “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Ephesians 4:29).

Some things to avoid

When we engage with fellow Christians in times of difference, certain kinds of speech are destructive to the peace and oneness that are to characterize God’s family.

- Sarcasm pierces the soul and leaves deep wounds.
- Getting angry, loud, and harsh is using blunt force that may beat people down in fear, but “the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:20).
- Calling people derogatory names assumes the place of being their Judge, and Jesus strongly warns against this kind of talking (Matthew 5:22). Giving labels to people like “legalist” or “liberal” or “fundamentalist” in order to discredit what they say often leaves people feeling misrepresented.
- Similarly, attacking people’s character, pointing out their faults, or questioning their spiritual commitment when we disagree with them is disrespectful and sidetracks us from the issue. For example, to quickly assert, “Well, you must not believe the Bible,” is an attack, not an attempt to understand or have healthy dialogue.
- Taking what people say to conclusions they do not intend is neither courteous nor helpful. For example, if one person says, “That’s not true,” and another responds by saying, “So you’re calling me a liar,” the second person has turned an objection into an accusation.

- Similarly, creating a distorted version of a person’s position and showing how “obviously” wrong it is may seem to refute the position, but this is actually a subtle form of misrepresentation. Suppose a brother in the church disregards certain hunting laws, for example, and another brother expresses concern. The offending brother responds, “Well, if we followed every whim of conservation officers, we wouldn’t be able to do anything.” By arguing against following “every whim of conservation officers,” the offender misrepresents and thus dismisses the actual concern.
- Twisting truth in any way, whether by exaggerating, minimizing, presenting only partial truth, or spreading falsehoods violates Christian speech. “Therefore, putting away lying, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,’ for we are members of one another” (Ephesians 4:25).

The typical bashing and acrimonious retorts that have become common among people arguing about the issues of our times are not becoming to those who follow Jesus. We can expect unbelievers to be unkind in their comments and unfair in their arguments. But God has a higher standard for those in His family.

Speak the truth in love

Paul says the way to build up one another in faith is to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Truth guides what we say; love guides how we say it.

The truth needed to guide us in facing specific issues often includes numerous truths—different sides of an issue, various biblical principles, and considerations of circumstances and outcomes. The value of a brotherhood is that one member can offer perspectives that others may overlook. If we do not value the input of each member, we can sometimes find ourselves arguing one truth against another, failing to realize that both truths are necessary to find a way forward.

Congregations have different ways of discussing issues. Some discussions happen informally in one-on-one conversations and in small groups. Some discussions are planned for brothers’ meetings or members’ meetings. In such times, we should encourage openness, valuing frank discussion even when there are differing viewpoints. We should avoid a scenario where strong-minded members dominate the discussion, and we should make it safe to speak for those who are more shy or quiet.

As truth guides us in what we say, love guides us in how we say it, when we say it, to whom we say it, and for what reason we say it.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13:1-7

Some questions to consider when talking about differences

Have I clearly understood what the other one is saying? Taking the time to hear one another can protect us from misunderstanding, can keep us from argument, and can encourage healthy dialogue.

Are we both right? Among Christians, A versus B is often not a difference of right versus wrong (as noted earlier) but a situation where two or more truths must be considered to arrive at a wise conclusion.

Does it matter? Sometimes when we stand back, we realize that the issue we are disagreeing on is not as big as it seems.

What matters most? Carrying forward the former point, we need to consider if we are violating major things by focusing on minor things. To a first-century Jew, eating or not eating certain kinds of foods no doubt seemed like a big issue, but if it resulted in judgmental words and harsh actions and caused a Gentile brother to stumble, a lesser issue was causing a greater problem. (See 1 Corinthians 8:13 and Matthew 23:23.)

How can we best glorify Jesus? As followers of Jesus, we must certainly care about the positions we take and about the outcomes of our discussion of differences. But the question is not so much “Who is right?” but “What does Jesus want us to do?” The choice might not be between two opposing views, but for something even better.

In my interaction with my brothers and sisters, am I demonstrating earthly wisdom or the wisdom from above? Just as important as being right in my position is being right in the way I present it. The way we address differences is as much a reflection of our Lord as the positions we hold. It is not only necessary to find a right conclusion to the issues of the day, but to do so “with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2).

Conclusion

In God's design, the community of believers benefits from the contribution of each member, and each member is guided and protected by the greater wisdom of the community. What a privilege to be able to draw from a whole group of Spirit-filled believers! We must not allow this wonderful arrangement to get hijacked by resorting to harmful, destructive communication habits. By listening attentively, speaking truthfully, and showing attitudes of respect, humility, and goodwill, we can discuss the difficult issues of our times and find answers that honor God and bless His people.

A very practical question to ask ourselves: Would I talk in this tone of voice (or write using these words) if Jesus were standing here with me?

He is.

"Inasmuch as you did it [or said it] to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it [and said it] to Me" (Matthew 25:40).

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We welcome your response.

Write us at contact@anabaptistviewpoint.org

or send a letter to:

ViewPoint

28527 Guys Mills Rd

Guys Mills, PA 16327

Church leaders, subscribe by sending an email or a letter, or visit anabaptistviewpoint.org.

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